

- Last week, we looked at how, as he neared the end of his 3rd missionary journey, the Spirit compelled Paul to go to Jerusalem, making it clear to him that imprisonment and affliction awaited him.
- We saw how other believers received the same information, but filtered that information through their affections for Paul, arriving at the conclusion that he should not go.
- We saw that Paul was obedient and that despite the actions of multiple role-players threatening to derail his trajectory, the Spirit coordinated his movements in such a way that he would find his way back to Caesarea, where he would, in time, have the opportunity to address governors and kings.
- We ended with something of a throwaway point, where I had mentioned that in the space of 12 days, Paul had gone through a whirlwind of events and had found that his life had suddenly become uncomfortable. The Spirit led him directly into a cell!
- Today, I would like to pick up on this final idea of the pursuance of kingdom over comfort by looking at Paul's time under Felix and then under Festus, focussing on his appearance before the king.
- I will do this under 3 headings.

### 1. The fallacy of fruitlessness as failure

- When Paul arrived in Caesarea, the Roman governor Felix decided to keep him until his accusers arrived.

- After 5 days, the high priest (Ananias), together with some elders and a spokesperson (Tertullus), came and presented their case.
- Felix delayed his decision regarding the case until such time as Lysius, the Tribune who had set Paul in the first place, could come and provide an independent witness account.
- It is unclear whether the Tribune ever came.
- What is clear is that Felix decided not to take Paul's case to the point of closure and to keep him in custody, despite the fact that he not only possessed the authority to release Paul but should have released Paul, since he had no evidence against him.
- It seems there are at least 3 reasons why he chose to do this. Luke tells us that:
  - (1) Felix had an accurate knowledge of "the Way," which is what Christianity was called at first, and that he and his wife Drusilla, a Jew, would often send for him and converse with him about the faith.
  - (2) Felix was hoping that Paul would pay a bribe for his release.
  - (3) Felix kept him in an attempt to curry favour with the Jews.
- Now, notice what Luke says in 24:27:
- "When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus."
- Let's take a moment to allow that to sink in.
- Paul of Tarsus, Apostle to the Gentiles, planter of churches, author of a significant portion of the NT, apologist par excellence, ministered to this man and his wife for two years, while being subjected to a wrongful incarceration.

- I do not know about you guys, but I struggle to serve people I do not get along with, let alone an oppressor!
- The fact that Felix continued to stand with his hand open for a bribe and did not do the right thing in releasing Paul strongly suggests to me that he never came to faith in Jesus Christ.
- It would seem, on the face of it, that Paul's ministry over that two-year period bore little to no fruit!
- This reminds me of the story of William Carey, the father of modern missions.
- In the late 1700's, Carey took his family and moved to India, convinced that he had been called to take the gospel to that nation.
- His early years were marked by *one hardship after another*.
  - Within the first year, Carey's five-year-old son Peter died of dysentery.
  - His wife Dorothy, overwhelmed by grief and the pressures of life in a foreign land, suffered a severe mental breakdown that lasted for the rest of her life. She was eventually confined/institutionalised and died insane.
  - Carey battled malaria, loneliness, and poverty so intense that he had to take a job working on an indigo plantation just to feed his family.
  - For seven long years, he preached, translated, and served without seeing a single convert.
- Thankfully, Carey persevered and eventually saw extraordinary fruit.
- What can we learn from Paul and Carey?
- **The idea that a ministry *must* display visible and measurable fruits for it to be worth doing is a fallacy.**

- Put another way, sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ is always worth it, regardless of the results.
- If Paul had been motivated by results, they would have given up after the first few conversations.
- But Paul persisted. He took every opportunity over the course of those two years to minister to them.
- We do not know if the seeds Paul planted germinated after [Acts 24](#).
- But I expect that Paul prayed for him right to the end, regardless of the hesitancies of Felix and Drusilla.
- This brings me to my next heading.

## 2. The hesitancies of the human heart

- As we look throughout history, it is clear that there are common ways in which people respond to the gospel. In our focus text for this morning, we will see 3 of these clearly showcased.
- But before we get to the focus text, allow me to provide some background.
- Felix is succeeded by Festus.
- The Jews approach Festus and urge him to bring Paul to Jerusalem for trial, planning to ambush and kill him along the way.
- Festus says he is going to Caesarea and that they should accompany him and bring their charges against him there.
- They came and presented their accusations, but Paul argued that there was no evidence of any wrongdoing. They had no witnesses and could not substantiate the charges.

- Wishing to do the Jews a favour, Festus asks Paul if he would like to go to Jerusalem and be tried there.
  - Paul, well aware of the intentions of the Jews by now, takes advantage of his Roman citizenship and appeals to Caesar.
  - This presents Festus with a procedural problem: he must compose a letter to accompany Paul to Rome and explain the details of the case. But he lacked a sufficient understanding of the matter.
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- At this stage, Herod Agrippa II, and his sister Bernice, enter the scene.
  - Now, who was Herod Agrippa?
  - The Herods were a royal dynasty that remained in power partly due to hereditary succession and partly due to appointment by the Roman Empire. The Herods were Jews but were distinguished from earlier Israelite kings in that they were appointed by Roman Emperors to rule over a particular region. Jerusalem fell under Herod Agrippa and so he had authority over the temple, with the freedom to appoint and remove the high priest. While he did not command the council, he had significant power to shape the leadership and direction of the council. He was essentially the point person for the Roman government on internal Jewish religious affairs.
  - While Herod did not wield judicial power over cases that were set before Roman governors — Paul's case was squarely in the hands of Festus — he was a specialist and a helpful informant, who would be able to assist Festus with his letter to the Emperor.
  - So Festus tells Agrippa what had happened and Agrippa says he would like to hear Paul himself.

- The next day, Agrippa and Bernice arrive with great pomp and ceremony, entering the audience hall with tribunes and prominent men of the city.
- And just like that, after 2 years of waiting, Paul is brought in and he is given permission to speak.
- Paul recounts his background as a Pharisee and opposer of the way and then tells of his conversion and his calling by Jesus of Nazareth, who had suffered and died, had risen again, and had sent Paul to take the gospel to the Gentiles.
- And so we arrive at our focus text.

#### **Acts 26:24–32 ESV**

<sup>24</sup> And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.” <sup>25</sup> But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. <sup>26</sup> For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. <sup>27</sup> King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” <sup>28</sup> And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” <sup>29</sup> And Paul said, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.” <sup>30</sup> Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. <sup>31</sup> And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, “This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.” <sup>32</sup> And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

- In school, when we studied Shakespeare, we learned that often, the characters in his plays were not just people with a name. They were

archetypes. They were walking metaphors, often representing some theme or concept or virtue or vice.

- As I read this passage of Scripture, I imagine it through a Shakespearean lens:
  - The courtroom becomes a stage.
  - Paul is the shackled prisoner with arm outstretched, addressing the royalty and nobility.
  - They all peer down at him over their noses, with three characters — Festus, Bernice, and Agrippa — featuring most prominently in the mix. They are character archetypes. They represent the ways in which people resist the gospel. They showcase the hesitations of the human heart.
- Can you guess who is showcasing what?
- **Festus is the Rational Cynic**
  - “You are out of your mind!” he cries. “Your great learning is driving you out of your mind!”
  - He represents the skeptic, the guy who appeals to the natural order of things and says that it is a logical impossibility that a man subjected to Roman crucifixion should get up a few days later and walk around again.
  - He accuses those who believe in the resurrection of dead people of being either gullible or stark-raving mad!
- **Bernice is the Passive Spectator**
  - She enters with great fanfare, sits and listens, but isn’t greatly affected by anything. She is indifferent.
  - She represents the person who occasionally occupies a pew, likes the heritage of the church, appreciates the liturgy, but does not really allow for the message to penetrate and affect change.

- But the most tragic of the three has to be Agrippa.
- **Agrippa is the Postponing Politician**
  - He understands the gospel. He has researched it. He may even believe it to be true. But he cannot bring himself to accept it, especially in public, since the spectacle would be inconvenient.
  - He represents the person who is convicted but is paralysed by pride or a desire to save face. He represents those who know what they should do but do not do it for fear of what the world will think.
- Have you ever shared the gospel?
- Have you ever encountered one of these personas? I have.
- It can be incredibly challenging when someone tears into the gospel with logic, shrugs it off as meaningless, or seems to show an interest but has something that stands in the way of acceptance.
- If you encounter these characters once too often, it can wear you down.
- But here is what I want us to see: Paul dealt with all 3 of these common hesitations, at the same time, after 2 long years of incarceration, and he didn't flinch!
  - When he saw the old familiar faces, he did not decide that this was fruitless. He did not decide that he should give up and argue for his freedom instead.
  - When Festus interrupts with an outburst, he does not allow himself to be distracted in an attempt to protect his own character.
  - He doubled down with his argumentation.
- This brings me to my final heading.

### 3. Persistent witness over personal priorities

- Unfazed by their responses and their antagonism, Paul presents a double-barrelled argument.
- It is directed at the king, and it goes something like this:
  - (1) The details surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus is no secret, especially to you, given your position as the point person on religious affairs in and around Jerusalem.
  - (2) Your position demands that you believe the prophets, and if you do, you know that they affirm these events as true and Jesus as the Messiah.
- Of the suffering of the Messiah, so says Isaiah:

#### **Isaiah 53:3–5 ESV**

<sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. <sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

- Of the resurrection of the Messiah, so says King David:

#### **Psalms 16:10 ESV**

<sup>10</sup> For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.

- And these are only two among many!
- The themes of the death and resurrection of the Messiah weave their way through the entire OT.

- For an expert in Jewish customs like Agrippa, this would be too obvious to dismiss.
- Paul presents Agrippa with what is referred to as a rhetorical trap.
- By asking him if he believes in the prophets, he forces him into a corner because he *should* believe in the prophets but an affirmative answer would *commit* him to accepting Jesus as the Messiah.
- The precise intention behind Agrippa's response is a topic of debate.
- The traditional understanding was that he was "almost persuaded." This was motivated by the KJV, which reads, "Almost, thou persuadest me to be a Christian."
- However, most modern scholars, and most modern translations, present his response as more of a scornful, sarcastic deflection. From this perspective, a paraphrase would sound something like this:
- "Do you really think that in such a short period of time, and with such little argumentation, I would be persuaded to become a Christian?"
- I find this perspective to be convincing, especially when you consider that he was essentially the "Minister of Jewish Religious Affairs." His role was fundamentally tied to Judaism. If he converted to Christianity, the Jewish leaders would have viewed him as apostate and he would have been instantly disqualified.
- When we learn what became of Agrippa, it is clear that his position mattered to him more than almost anything else. When the Jewish revolt began in AD66, he sided with Rome and fought alongside the Roman General Vespasian against his own people. After Jerusalem fell, he relocated to Rome. He died childless at the end of the first century, with no kingdom and no heir.

- Here is a man who was acutely concerned with protecting his position and status. For Agrippa, the cost of accepting Jesus was too great.
- What a tragedy!
- And speaking of tragedies, the narrative ends with a Shakespearean twist.
- You see, usually, the protagonist is usually destroyed by some fatal flaw.
- But in Acts, we see the opposite.
- The protagonist stands before these 3 archetypes, these 3 people who represent the ways in which humans resist and reject the gospel, and he offers them a way out of their own tragedy.
- “Festus, your cynicism is a cage. Bernice, your passivity is a prison. Agrippa, your indecision is an incarceration. I am the one in chains, but I am the only one who is free!”
- **Paul ends not by asking for freedom, but by offering them the freedom that he already has.**
- He persistently prioritised witness over his own personal priorities, regardless of the hesitancy, and regardless of the result.
- May God help us to do the same.